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Whither the National Volunteers

by DAITHÍ Ó CORRÁIN

Of all the groups associated with the period of the First World War, the National Volunteers, those who sided with Redmond in September 1914, have arguably been the most neglected by historians. The general assumption — most recently indicated in Briona Nic Dhiarmada's documentary for RTE — was that they all trooped off to war in 1914 and that the organisation faded away. The result was that the National Volunteers disappeared from the historical narrative. It is intended to remedy this state of affairs by providing an outline of the trajectory of the Redmondite Volunteers before, during and after 1916.

Following the split, the Irish National Volunteers were launched on 30 September 1914 at a meeting in Dublin City Hall at which Redmond was unanimously elected chairman. Retaining the original motto 'defence not defiance', the stated purpose of the organisation was 'to train, equip and arm a Volunteer force for the defence of Ireland and the advancement and preservation of Irish rights and the maintenance of Irish National self-government'.¹ Accordingly, each battalion was to carry two flags: the national flag of a gold harp with nine silver strings on a green background, and the Volunteer flag of a golden sunburst on a blue background [see opposite, p. 52]. In many ways these aims mirrored those of the MacNeillite Irish Volunteers. For many ordinary National Volunteers this commitment to the defence of Ireland meant home defence and not, as is often assumed, foreign service. Indeed, one week after Woodenbridge, Redmond was warned by Maurice Moore of the dangers of raising the highly sensitive issue of recruitment. In many ways this forced Redmond to adopt something of a dual policy but one that was poorly understood by individual National Volunteers. On the one hand he called for enlistment, but on the other he pressed the government to recognise the National Volunteers for the purpose of home defence on the same basis as the

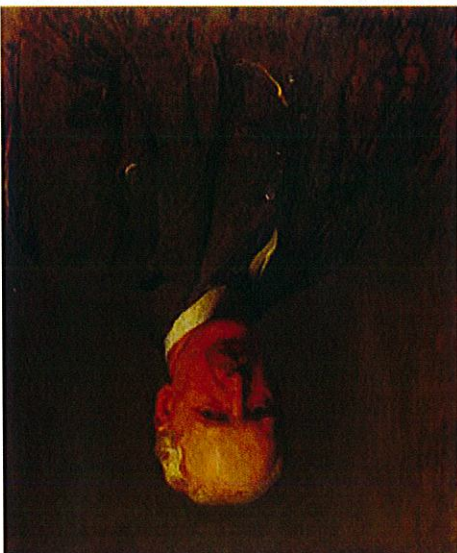
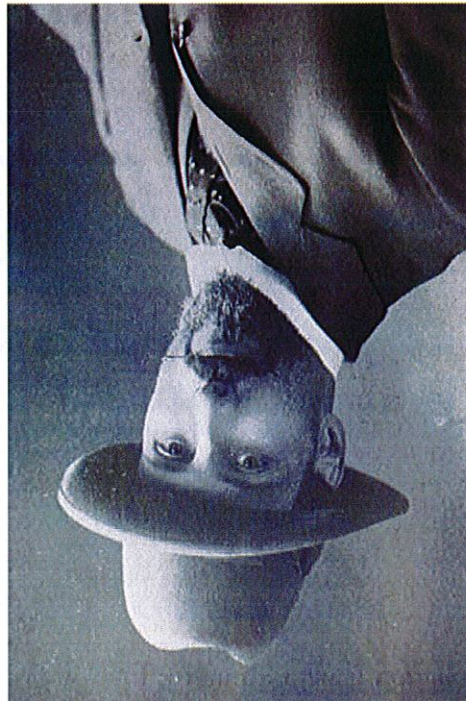
Territorials in Britain.

The National Volunteers were run by a 33-member national committee, first from offices at 16 South Frederick Street, and from January 1915 at 44 Parnell Square West, the building now known as the Kevin Barry Memorial Hall [photo, right]. Of the thirty-three members, seven (Laurence Kettle [photo, overleaf], John Gore, James Lenehan, Robert Page, George Walsh, Peter O'Reilly and Maurice Moore) had been on the original provisional committee of the Irish Volunteers in late 1913. Moore was appointed inspector-general with supreme command of the military council.²



¹ N.L.I., MS. 9.239 (Maurice Moore Papers): Minutes of meeting of the National Committee of the National Volunteers, 14 Oct. 1914.

² Ibid, 30 Sept. 1914.



[above] Colonel Maurice Moore (1854-1939)
 [left] Laurence Joseph Kettle (1878-1960),
 elder brother of the barrister-intellectual Tom
 Kettle, who fell at Ginchy

Having failed to prevent the rupture, Moore [portrait, above right] threw in his lot with the National Volunteers on the basis that they would ultimately have to come under the control of the expected Irish government when home rule was implemented. We should not underestimate how damaging the split proved for both species of Volunteer. It threw the National Volunteers into a state of confusion and disorganisation. Headquarters had to make countless enquiries to ascertain the names of county chairmen and secretaries. Often there were none. The secretary of the Westmeath county board did not even have the correct address for headquarters and was sending correspondence to 49 Parnell Square. Both Volunteer groups faced considerable common challenges. These included putting in place a functioning headquarters structure; electing county boards, composed of delegates from each company; holding a Volunteer convention; promulgating a constitution; assessing the strength of existing companies; deciding membership rules; gathering affiliation fees; publishing a weekly newspaper; training and equipping companies. Many nominal Volunteers from both groups grew disillusioned by the end of September and simply withdrew. With the backing of the I.R.P. one might have expected the National Volunteers to prosper but in his report for November 1914, the R.I.C. inspector-general commented 'there is at present no enthusiasm in this force, which has neither organisation, nor officers, is utterly untrained and practically unarmed.'³

³ Nat. Arch., Kew, CO 904/95: Monthly report by Inspector-General, R.I.C., for Dec. 1914.

First, many instructors and reservists were called to the colours in August 1914, and the more committed members enlisted. Between the outbreak of the war and mid-December 1914, 10,341 known members of the National Volunteers joined the army. In the same period 16,435 Ulster Volunteers and 13,633 men not known to be volunteers also enlisted – a total of 40,000 or so.⁴ This had an adverse impact on training. Furthermore, many companies feared they would be spirited away to the front if caught drilling. This was compounded by Redmond's recruiting campaign.

Secondly, the National Committee proved to be little more than a political talking shop. The surviving minutes reveal a lack of urgency, an obsession with procedure, deference to Redmond and most conspicuously a curious silence on military matters. It was also guilty of profligate financial management and frittered away a £6,000 start-up fund raised by Redmond. Much of this was spent on the *National Volunteer* newspaper which specialised in political attacks on the Irish Volunteers rather than on military matters. At dilatory meetings of the National Committee, Moore was seldom able to effect his purpose being thwarted by the Committee's parsimony, prevarication, penchant for postponement, and proclivity to refer issues to subcommittees. In this way the holding of a national convention and the finalisation of a constitution were continually postponed. A planned headquarters staff comprising chief inspectors of organisation, inspection, instruction and arms, never came to fruition. At the end of October a despondent Moore complained to Redmond: 'I have been trying to get some practical work begun since the split and find myself not once inch advanced.'⁵ This lack of progress was replicated at a local level. At an officer training camp in Limerick it was reported that 'All the officers ... were restive and grumbling at the standstill in the Volunteers'.⁶

Thirdly, the National Volunteers were roped tightly to Redmond's faltering war policy. Despite the indifference of the War Office, the I.P.F. continued throughout 1915 to pin its hopes on the National Volunteers being accepted for home defence. In December 1914 this idea seemed to gain traction when the Cork National Volunteers offered to assist the military and police by guarding waterworks and railway bridges. To ordinary volunteers this offered the prospect of meaningful semi-military work. In January and February 1915 respectively the South County Dublin and Inishowen National Volunteers offered to perform coastal defence duties. Matthew Nathan, the under-secretary, wished to accept such offers but taking a legalistic approach the military authorities would only do so if the Volunteers were sworn in as unarmed special constables. The National Committee in Dublin objected to these conditions. In March, after much lobbying by Redmond, the idea of putting the National Volunteers on the same footing as Territorials was favoured by Asquith but strongly opposed by the War Office.

⁴ N.L.I., MS. 15,259 (John Redmond Papers): Recruiting statistics from outbreak of war to 15 Dec. 1914.
⁵ N.L.I., MS. 10,561 (Moore Papers), p. 34; Moore to John Redmond 29 Oct. 1914.
⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19; J. J. Holland to Moore, 12 Oct. 1914.

This rejection did great damage to the National Volunteers. Ordinary members questioned the purpose of continued membership. By extension Redmond's strategy was also undermined. He had hoped if Volunteers enlisted for home service and did practical work connected with their district that volunteers for foreign service would follow. He also believed that this would release about 20,000 regular troops for the war. Nonetheless, by the end of December 1915 28,072 National Volunteers had enlisted compared to 28,327 Ulster Volunteers. By September 1916 this figure had increased to over 30,000, surpassing the number of U.V.F.⁷ But Redmond received scant thanks for his efforts. Another reason for declining membership of the National Volunteers was a lack of arms which held a magnetic attraction for ordinary Volunteers. Many companies saw little point in continuing if arms were not forthcoming from Dublin. The police believed the National Volunteers were 'practically unarmed', possessing about 10,117 rifles compared to 53,340 in the hands of the U.V.F., and 1,435 in the possession of the Irish Volunteers.⁸ About 4,000 rifles were Italian Vetterli [photo, below] which dated from 1870. These were sold by J. D. Nugent, secretary of the A.O.H., for £1 apiece. Companies wanting better rifles could hand in three Italian rifles for one Martini Enfield. This led to much confusion and disappointment.



Redmond was under unrelieved pressure to secure arms. For example, in June 1915 the secretary of the Limerick City National Volunteers warned that the rank and file eagerly awaited rifles and 'a disappointment of their expectations might lead to a thinning of their ranks'.⁹ Although the supply of serviceable weapons had dried up under wartime conditions, Redmond was able to import obsolete weapons under permit using a highly convoluted system of personal intermediaries: Asquith; the Under Secretary of State for War; the Master-General of the Ordnance; the G.O.C. London; the Chief Secretary for Ireland; Nathan; and the G.O.C. of the Forces in Ireland. But this importation generated as many difficulties as it solved and was very time-consuming. The request from Limerick was only fulfilled at the end of October. Furthermore, there were never

⁷ N.L.I., MS. 15,259 (Redmond Papers): 'Estimate of the number of reservists and recruits who have rejoined or joined from Ireland since the outbreak of War up to 15 December 1916, classified as National Volunteers, Ulster Volunteers, and others'.
⁸ Nat. Arch., Kew, CO 904/96: R.I.C. Inspector-General's monthly report for Jan. 1915.
⁹ N.L.I., MS. 15,261 (Redmond Papers), p. 4; Cornelius Cregan (Hon. Recording Sec. Limerick City Regiment National Volunteers) to Redmond, 7 June 1915.

enough rifles and securing obsolete ammunition for archaic weapons proved almost impossible in wartime. The military authorities grew increasingly worried about the storage of arms and whether they remained in proper hands. Doubts were intensified by the embarrassing theft of rifles destined for the National Volunteers in November 1914 and again in August 1915. In his papers, Diarmuid Lynch (1878-1950) [left] of the I.R.B. recalled securing financial assistance for the Irish Volunteers in Ennislymon who negotiated the sale of twenty Lee Enfield rifles from the defunct local National Volunteers.



The National Volunteers were also hobbled by lack of funds and even basic information on unit strength. So grave was the financial position of the National Volunteers that in July 1915 an auditors' report suggested replacing one of Moore's military staff with a lady typist: a bizarre economy for a supposedly semi-military organisation.

In Ulster there were other reasons for declining interest in the Volunteers. The county secretary in Fermanagh attributed the standstill in 1915 to suspension of operations by the rival U.V.F. But the biggest factor in explaining the falling away of the National Volunteers was the fear of conscription. Though usually associated with 1918, conscription was a very real concern from the autumn of 1914 onwards. No matter how often Moore and his staff emphasised that the National Volunteers were no more likely to be conscripted than non-Volunteers, the dread of conscription persisted. Many National Volunteers stopped drilling as they feared they would be taken first in the event of conscription. Conscription was a boon to the Irish Volunteers as many young men who were unable to emigrate joined their ranks as did Redmondite National Volunteers.

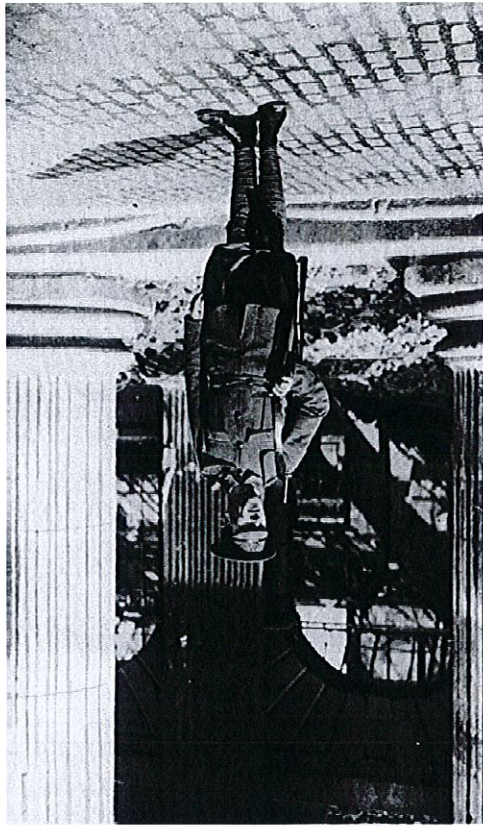
Early in 1915 the I.P.P. M.P.s made an effort to reorganise the National Volunteers in preparation for a national review at Easter. Moore fought an arduous and bad-tempered battle with the National Committee over this. He wanted a military review in the Phoenix Park but Redmond wanted a big demonstration in the streets which Moore regarded as a naked political pageant or rally. The gathering was attended by about 20,000 National Volunteers. It was superficially impressive and belied a belief (or perhaps just the hope) that a show of organisational zeal would be enough to persuade lapsed members to return. They certainly did but only for the day out. The priority for the National Volunteers of Ardflinn in Tipperary was a few hours' free time to visit Dublin Zoo. Having travelled 200 miles, the Kerry contingent missed the procession in O'Connell Street due to a combination of a late train and the disappearance of their guide. The parish priest in Castlebar (Canon Meehan) offered a withering critique of the review: 'the plain truth is that Redmond's Volunteers all over the country are dead, except perhaps on paper or as far as the existing political

machine can manufacture a hollow show for an Easter holiday'.¹⁰ On paper at the time of the review there were 750 registered companies headed by Tipperary with 73 and Dublin city and county with 52. After the review the I.P.P. stepped up recruitment speeches. This together with the conscription panic linked to Lord Wimborne's recruitment conference in October 1915 had a disastrous effect on the National Volunteers which atrophied. As Nicholas Carty of Rush put it, the men and their mothers got frightened by the conscription scare and others got tired of the business.¹¹

Until the summer of 1915 the dutiful Moore continued to journey from county to county tirelessly attending reviews, performing inspections and rousing lapsed companies. By June he admitted that he had had 'a dose of speeches, inspections and travelling'.¹² His efforts were paralleled by those of Captain John Eckersey who visited Cavan, Tyrone, Tipperary, Limerick and Clare in an effort to counteract the efforts of rival Irish Volunteer organisers. By September a forlorn Moore believed 'nothing can be done with the Volunteers ... they cannot be

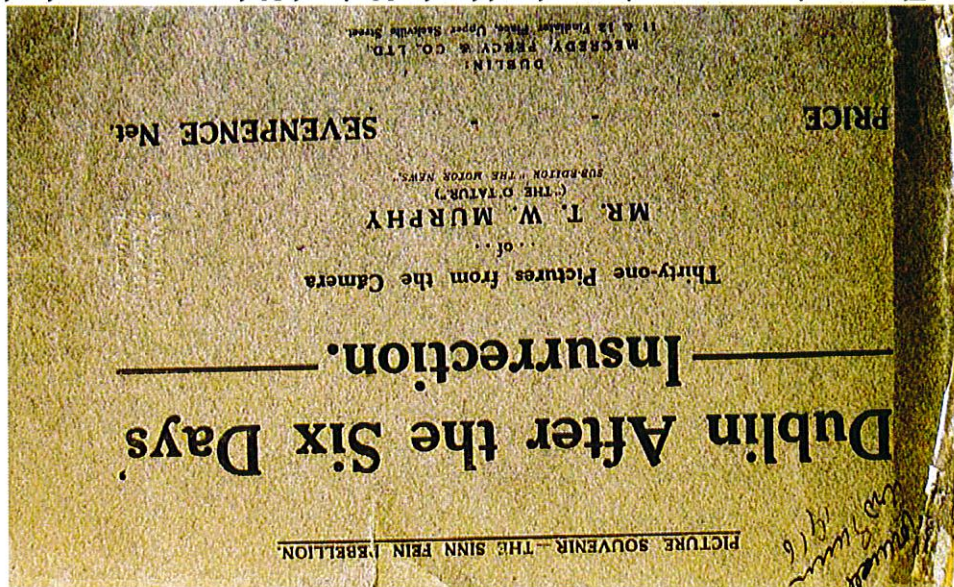
trained disciplined or armed; moreover the enthusiasm has gone and they cannot be kept going ... It has exhausted its usefulness'.¹³ He was granted leave of absence in March 1916 to re-enter military service. However, the Rising brought his appointment as garrison commander at Bere Island to a swift end. James Creen deputised as inspector-general of the National Volunteers. During the Rising he was concerned about the safety of arms at headquarters. He and Eckersey removed the bolts and blocks from the weapons before the building was raided on Easter Tuesday. On 27 April Creen also offered to convey terms between the army and the Irish Volunteers, but this was rejected.

To be seen left is a photograph of a 'loyal Volunteer' from a pictorial souvenir of the Rising - *Dublin after six days' insurrection: thirty-one pictures from the camera of Mr T. W. Murphy*. This image is in fact most



¹⁰ U.C.D. Archives, LA1/H/2 (Eoin MacNeill Papers), Canon Meehan (Castlebar) to Hemphill, 1 Mar. 1915.
¹¹ N.L.I., MS. 10,548 (Moore Papers), p. 5, Nicholas Carty to Creen, 9 Apr. 1916.
¹² Ibid., MS. 10,561 (Moore Papers), p. 2, Moore to Coffey, 27 June 1915.
¹³ Ibid., MS. 15,206 (Redmond Papers), p. 7, Moore to Redmond, 24 Sept. 1915.

misleading. The National Volunteers were not involved in any way with the Rising in Dublin but outside Dublin their services were offered to the authorities in Cork, Waterford, Dundalk and Enniscorthy.



The most important service rendered by the National Volunteers was to lend arms and ammunition to the Crown forces. For example, on Easter Monday, forty Lee Enfields were lent to the police in Dundalk; and in Waterford 198 carbines and 10,000 rounds of .303 ammunition were lent by W. J. Smith, commander of the Waterford city regiment National Volunteers. A total of 43 National Volunteers were arrested during and after the Rising. Crean and the I.P.P. went to considerable pains to secure their release.

The last throes of the National Volunteers are rarely if ever alluded to. Despite its increasing marginality, Moore remained deeply committed to the ailing National Volunteers, loyal to its constitution, and concerned for the rank and file. In the weeks and months after the Rising the key question for him was not if, but how, the organisation would be carried on. Once again there were acute fears of conscription in the summer of 1916. However, the civil and military authorities and the leadership of the I.P.P. were united in their opposition to any resuscitation of the National Volunteers. Under martial law drilling was prohibited. Undeterred, Moore pressed Maxwell to allow private drilling and to return the arms voluntarily lent during the rebellion. The arms were belatedly returned in January 1917 but, predictably, sanction for private drilling was withheld as the National Volunteers were not recognised by the War Office. Even the practice by the National Volunteers of Swedish drill [*photo*, overleaf], a form of Edwardian aerobics, was deemed illegal, and Moore was duly cautioned by the military authorities.



Moore pressed for a National Volunteer convention, which under the constitution had to be held at least every two years, so that the future direction of the movement could be discussed in the post-Rising circumstances. When this was indefinitely postponed by Redmond (who resigned from the National Committee in February 1917), Moore broke with the Committee in July 1917. With the connivance of the Irish Volunteer executive, Moore and his followers remained in possession of 44 Parnell Square. The long deferred convention was held in the Mansion House on 5 August. In his address Moore emphasised that 'the desire of all is to unite the Volunteers in Ireland as they were united in 1913 and 1914'.¹⁴ Later when Moore wrote a history of the Irish Volunteers — *Tús agus fás Oglagh na hÉireann* — his account finished deliberately with the reunion in 1917. Events had gone full circle.

To answer the question posed in the title of this paper — whether the National Volunteers — the answer is complex. Some went to war, but not as many as is usually suggested. Far more remained at home and displayed towards the war the same attitude as many of those in the Irish Volunteers. In the altered political climate after the Rising, some National Volunteers silently returned to the Irish Volunteer fold.

¹⁴ Ibid., MS. 10,545 (Moore Papers), p. 9, Address by Moore to Volunteer Convention, 5 Aug. 1917.

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